

“Masked and Anonymous” is a wild ride of a movie and to appreciate it it’s probably a good idea to try and put any preconceived notions about what a film is or should be aside. This is no typical or standard movie. At the same time where Dylan’s other excursions into filmmaking (“Eat The Document,” “Renaldo & Clara”) may have faltered at times, “Masked And Anonymous” succeeds, but on its own terms.

The storyline and the plot are incidental to the movie. They are pretty much a backdrop or a frame. Basically, (singer) Jack Fate is released from prison to play a benefit concert. You’re never exactly sure what it’s for. You also don’t know why Fate is in prison. What you do know is this is in a war-torn, violent, police state. You’re not even sure when this happening though ’60s references (particularly to music) abound throughout. The setting is a world gone very wrong where virtually every character apparently has suffered major burnout, and if it’s not apparent in their speech, it is in their faces. There is no luxury or relief anywhere in sight, and confusion abounds. Soldiers, armed guards are everywhere. The cars, the rooms are old, dingy, cramped with hints of the third world. The people in the movie are not of any single nationality, race or religion, but it appears they are existing (not exactly living) in some crazed inferno. In almost every scene there is something going on in the background: People doing menial tasks, vacuuming, cleaning, constantly running around – it is rarely quiet. And if they’re not doing menial tasks, they’re praying though you’re never exactly sure what religion they’re practicing.

So with that as the backdrop, Nina Veronika (played by Jessica Lange) is trying to promote a benefit to be broadcast by the Network, which is the government. Unable to lure any of the big stars she wants, she contacts manager Uncle Sweetheart, played brilliantly by John Goodman who steals the movie who can only suggest his former client Jack Fate, a has been singer. The Network doesn’t want him. Fate as it turns out, is also the son of the dying President whose picture is everywhere. While Fate is apparently considered a laughingstock, you know there’s something special about him, which comes out of course in the music – Bob Dylan music. As the camera pans through some desolate urban landscape the opening verse of “Blind Willie McTell” plays and the key line, “This land is condemned” hits hard. Dylan music plays constantly through the film, whether by him or an assortment of covers from all over the world. And it is used to great effect.

And soon it becomes apparent that this movie isn’t about Jack Fate at all (or is it?) but it’s about Bob Dylan, whoever that is. At the same time, it’s not about Bob Dylan, but what Bob Dylan (as Jack Fate) sees. This is his vision and it’s not pretty.

Throughout the film various characters, each with their own unique insanity come and go, usually delivering an intense rant along the way. Fate is the mostly silent observer and you know nothing escapes his forlorn eyes. He says little, except when he sings and occasionally delivers fairly revealing commentary over the proceedings.

Various characters can be related to people in Dylan's life. Sweetheart could be based on Albert Grossman, Bobby Cupid, (Luke Wilson) could be loosely based on Bob Neuwirth. Tom Friend, the once hip journalist who constantly pesters Fate with moronic questions ("What did you think about Zappa?" "Why weren't you at Woodstock?") could be based on Al Aronowitz. However, whether they are or not doesn't really matter.

The key to "Masked And Anonymous" isn't in the story or the characters. It's in the background, what's written on the walls, what's playing on the radio, the quick one-liners that slip out in conversation.

Even the acting doesn't matter. Some people, are good, others aren't. Giovanni Ribisi stands out as The Soldier in the beginning of the film as does Ed Harris as Oscar Vogel, a blackface minstrel who mysteriously appears, almost like an angel offering Fate advice when things get extremely desperate.

And while the film's vision is bleak and the commentary unrelenting, it is not without humor. There are both hysterical and silly moments, though being a Dylan fan may help with some of the jokes.

Will "Masked And Anonymous" be a smashing success in the real world whatever that is? Probably not and who cares? Is it landmark cinematic achievement? It doesn't matter. It could become as Michael G. Smith has pointed out on various Internet forums a cult classic, a great midnight movie.

Like "Renaldo & Clara" it is at times like a painting, but this time, probably thanks to Larry Charles directing, it's much more focused.

Consider it another chapter in the Bob Dylan canon. Perhaps the things he's wanted to say he couldn't put in a song, though at times the movie is constructed like a song.

As for the critics and the general public, as this film makes clear, they never got it to begin with.

Those who are seriously interested in Bob Dylan and what he has to say will want to see it more than once because you are not going to get it all the first time.

And for those who wonder what Bob Dylan really thinks about this world we exist in, well you just might find it here.